

Zone of the Interior: A Memoir, 1942-1947. Daniel Hoffman. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000, 127pp., \$22.50.

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Shortly after the release of *Saving Private Ryan* I had a discussion with a colleague who observed that if one truly wanted to make a movie about the men of World War II, one ought to make a movie about the process of training clerks. To be sure, such a movie would be terrible for popcorn sales, but my colleague had a point. The United States military of the World War II period trained thousands of men to do the unglamorous jobs that nevertheless make significant contributions to victory. Indeed, Allied success was due in no small part to America's dedication to selecting and training talented men and women for work in crucial support functions, even if such work rarely appears heroically on the silver screen.

While you should not expect to see Tom Hanks in the starring role any time soon, Daniel Hoffman's *Zone of the Interior* provides wonderful insight into the wartime experiences of one such clerk. In Daniel Hoffman we have no ordinary clerk. Hoffman served as America's Poet Laureate, then designated Consultant in Poetry of the Library of Congress, from 1973 to 1974. Who else, when asked to write an article on abortive experimental designs for helicopters, would consult the works of Leonardo da Vinci? And who else could have written a form love letter to meet the needs of his tormented and hard-pressed colleagues at Officers Candidate School?

Hoffman is one of a very few writers who could turn his memoir of writing technical and scientific abstracts into a thoroughly enjoyable book. During the course of the war, Hoffman went from a struggling student at Columbia to a private writing technical manuals to an officer to a student once again. But by 1945, Hoffman had acquired confidence in himself and a better understanding of the world and his place in it. As was true for many veterans, Hoffman's return to civilian life, while welcome, left him with a sense of unfulfillment. "To handle responsibilities in civilian life comparable to those I had held in service," he wrote, "would take years and years of apprenticeship" (118). Indeed, many veterans never completed their civilian apprenticeship, leaving them with a strange void and, for some, an unwelcome longing for the war they had once been so happy to leave behind.

Hoffman and the men and women with whom he worked understood the guilt they felt at living safely in the zone of the interior (the Army's term for the continental United States) while peers were fighting and dying across Europe and Asia. But they also understood the importance of the work they were doing, and they handled their guilt by working harder. With a poet's sensitivities, Hoffman captures the drudgery, the occasional excitement, and the ambivalence of a desk job at an Ohio air field in the midst of history's most destructive war.

But even service in Ohio provided opportunities and challenges impossible to experience in civilian life. Near the end of the war, Hoffman was assigned to escort the renowned Hungarian mathematician Theodore von Karman and his top-secret work (handcuffed to Hoffman's wrist) to a two-star general's office at the Pentagon. "Thus it was that a youth who couldn't pass college calculus was courier for the greatest mathematician on the Allied side, perhaps in the world" (113). Where else but in the topsy-turvy world of World War II could that happen? Where else could that same youth engage in a series of political discussions with famed socialist economist Lewis Corey or watch a fellow enlisted man spar with Billy Conn to raise unit morale? The zone of the interior may have lacked the movie-making material of Normandy or Guadalcanal, but Hoffman proves that it nevertheless opened doors to alert and interested young men and women.

Zone of the Interior's most important contribution may well be its demonstration that even a relatively unexciting role in World War II could nevertheless be a life-changing experience. One did not need to storm the beaches at Omaha or fly missions over Tokyo to understand the war as a personal watershed. It is appropriate that Hoffman's memoir ends with the beginning of his career as a poet. His first article in the *Antioch Review* resulted from an Army assignment while in Ohio. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine his career taking the path that it did without the war and what it taught him. So read and enjoy *Zone of the Interior*. Just don't expect it to appear at a theater near you.